

**FACING THE EMERGENT DIGITAL-INFORMATIONAL DIVIDE.
INFORMATIONAL CULTURE: THE CASE OF UNIVERSITY LIBRARY
USERS**

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ABSTRACT: The present paper describes the university library user of the 21st century and his needs of information. Within this context, we outline the lack of a “library culture”, which has as consequence that generally a small segment of the educational community makes use of the diversity of services offered by a library.

The idea of the formation of a strategic and autonomous user has for years been part of the expectations of many university librarians; the solution would be to develop and to apply a methodology adjusted to the reality of each university, but that can also be used as a guide for others. Librarians are faced with this problem that might be inserted within the “informational divide”. Our reality is that we are not fully prepared to elaborate user training programs.

An initiative, formulated to orientate the development of proposals for approaching the problem of user education, is presented.

KEYWORDS: User training; university libraries; Chile

Introduction

We are growingly concerned with a series of events regarding the user-librarian relationship, which affect us continuously: everyday situations such as students not knowing how to ask for what they require, such as books being asked for by the color of

their jacket, the lack of general knowledge respecting books and other information resources, or the ignorance regarding the context or the extension of a work or investigation they are carrying out. These everyday situations lead us to question ourselves what is causing these situations, what elements are part of them and whether they are affecting us only or is it a generalized phenomenon. Informal discussions among our peers have made us reflect, and we have come to realize that we are dealing with situations in which everyone who has to do with the transference of knowledge and information, is involved, and which affect us in our daily work. “Learning to ask questions and to formulate problems is even more important than learning to answer them or finding solutions” (Gazpio & Alvarez 1999).

Historically, librarians have responded to the human need for preserving and transmitting knowledge, and this has been the traditional role of professionals of librarianship, who have been improving methods and techniques with a certain degree of success: in this new society in which information has a protagonist role, it isn’t strange to feel ourselves marginalized, because everything evolves at such an overwhelming speed and it becomes essential to comprehend what is going on, a scenario which both attracts and intimidates us.

The universe of libraries has in the last decade experienced important changes, which have coincided with the emergence of information and communication technologies (ICTs), in developing countries. The library has had to adapt to the needs of users, who have to navigate in the complex world of information. These new technologies have affected with even more force in university libraries, which has obligated us to develop new strategic planning and quality controls.

Students who come to our universities generally ignore what libraries have to offer. In the best of cases they are considered places for study and places where books are kept. Besides, the newly arrived student has not yet acquired the habit of making use of the library, simply because he has not required it or because he does not have the previous acquired experience of it from his school. As his need for information increases, he will approach the library not knowing the diversity of services offered. This ignorance is further explained because teachers also ignore the universe of information resources available. Our challenge, then is oriented toward supplying end users with the necessary competencies, to attain independence or self-sufficiency in the use of information resources, within the frame of what ICTs are offering us, as well as systematizing and optimizing formative actions within the library.

The university library user profile

The informational divide corresponds to a social phenomenon with cultural, social, economic and educational roots. In the present scenario, people tend to acquire information by means of the technology available; however, and paradoxically, “technologies have not solved the problems of equity to information access; millions of people still exist who do not have access to the benefits of culture through books, nor of

information” (Ponjuan 2001). The illiterate of tomorrow is not he who cannot read, but he who did not learn how to learn: it means that in the process of learning a specific matter, a person is learning a method for capturing knowledge. The method is repeatable. That is the true meaning of “learning how to learn”

Of the diversity of the human potential which today’s libraries face, we assume the importance of comprehending the user in his own context (social, political, economic and cultural) and of exploring all possible links between him and library services, from his own point of view. We are aware that the efficiency of a library’s services is not measured by the number of volumes that it holds, but by the amount of satisfaction users achieve.

Describing the profile of the university user that we are dealing with, did not come as an easy task; however, we came up with some characteristics, by means of a survey applied to university librarians belonging to eight different universities in the cities of Valparaiso and Viña del Mar, public and private.

To the question: which are the main characteristics observed in users? (in regard to their behavior in the process of becoming informed) we established that:

- they are generally ignorant of the value of information, its importance and management
- they are confused, unmotivated and ignorant of the importance of keeping themselves informed
- there are strong deficiencies in the use of the language (Spanish)
- they have limited vocabulary, cannot express their ideas and needs for information clearly
- they have little or no reading or study habits at all, regardless of whether the student comes from a private or public school
- in the first three years of study, his needs for information are limited to the basic bibliography assigned in class
- they are indolent students, inexperienced in information seeking techniques

To further illustrate this matter, we bring up the tipification made by Eisenberg and Berkowvicks, who established three kinds of users:

- The passive user is permanently bombarded with random information, which he does not look for but which simply comes to him. For him, the overabundance of information is a cause of distraction and his difficulty lies in processing it and relating it to his own needs.
- The user that is incapable of analyzing the information resulting from a specific search, he recovers too much information and cannot determine which is worth reading and utilizing. He cannot select accordingly to his own purposes and needs.

- The paralyzed user: he feels overwhelmed by enormous amounts of information or by fruitless searches. His difficulty lies in his inability to examine and adjust his own search strategies.

We hereby conclude that a greater amount of information does not increase our security; on the contrary, it reduces it because it demands greater efforts to acquire a certain comprehension, to analyze and to evaluate the data we are receiving (Gazpio and Alvarez 1999).

However, we recognize in the user a certain advantage, in that he has the ability to teach himself in the use of technologies; he belongs to a generation which has grown up with information technology in all its expressions: television, computers, Internet, etc. Sartori, in his book "*Homo videns*", says that "with the multimedial revolution, the present culture has transformed "*homo sapiens*" into a "*homo videns*", for whom the word has been overcome by the image. The stimulus of reading and knowledge transmitted by the written culture has been replaced by the culture of images" (Sartori 1998). Even if these tendencies have become evident in our society only in the last decade, they have produced an effect on more than one generation, but in different ways. However, it is necessary to comprehend that these young people who belong to this "culture of virtuality", sooner or later will need to establish a closer relationship with those instruments that enable them to canalize in a better way their social and cultural and learning learning.

This scenario raises a challenge to us as information professionals, and forces us to go to the aid of our users, to search for and improve strategies which enable us to optimize our efforts and to traduce them into specific actions oriented to offering advice and counseling and making efforts so that these actions are integrated into study programs.

Origin of the problem

In an article published in the Chilean newspaper "*La Hora*", on August 8, 2002, questions were raised regarding the role of libraries in schools. It says: "each school which considers itself as a good educational institutions must have a library. But, how many children do go to it? How many of them know how to use an encyclopedia? How many children consider it a space for study and knowledge ? And with the spread of the Internet, how many children have definitely replaced the library for good?" And he goes on: "without a library, a school is not a proper school, but more a place of authoritative preaching that resembles a prison."

In this panorama, new questions arise: where does the present university student come from? What sort of environment has surrounded him in his years of school?

To get a clearer picture, we conducted a telephone survey among 30 public and private schools of primary and secondary education of Valparaiso and Viña del Mar. The results show that 86 % of the schools do have a school library in their premises, but only 35 % of

them hired a librarian with a degree in Librarianship to run it. The other 65 % have a secretary or a teacher to run the school library, most of the time only for a few hours a week.

We think that this situation is common to most countries in South America. The role of the school librarian is not understood as being co-interpreter in the learning process. The school library must be understood as a driving agent of the teaching process. Class contents should be connected with activities carried out by the school library; it follows that the right kind of professional should be hired to carry out such programs.

It seems that the double meaning of library professional, meaning librarian and teacher, is not yet fully understood. Until this happens, university libraries will have to assume the task of creating instances in which to fill out these deficiencies in first-year students, in respect to their relationship with the world of information.

However, we cannot ignore the effort being carried out on a governmental level, with respect to access to books and reading programs, offering funds for projects destined for public schools and negotiating donations coming from international or private organizations. Projects such as “Public Libraries Network for the New Millennium”, aspire to guarantee equal access to new information and communication technologies to all Chileans, in order to surmount the digital divide and insert our country in the global environment. This project will be partly financed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Government authorities, in the Ministry of Education, acknowledge the strategic importance of books and reading, in the process of being a part of the information society. The experience of technologically developed countries shows us that reading and comprehension skills have become a basic need inherent to the shaping of citizens exercising free will.

Under this conception, we recognize the need to strengthen libraries belonging to the educational system, making them obligatory in public and private schools; we stress the importance of each library being in charge of a professional of the information sciences, capable of developing strategies and making the best use of resources and students’ potential, in order to help them achieve their full development in this context.

For the moment, opinion surveys make clear to us that deficiencies evidenced by users of university libraries are in great measure due to the lack of a previous relationship to the use of libraries and interaction with information resources, the lack of a primitive library culture, the absence of spaces where books and information may take a leading part that would allow them to attain new and different ways of understanding reality and to envision themselves and their environment in a critical manner.

Accordingly, we can infer that hereby lies the problem of university libraries in their relationship to library users: the non-existence of a past that allows users to adapt not

only to the dynamic of academic formation, characteristic to universities, but also to their inherent needs for information. We come face to face with an inherited problem, with persons who have grown up under the constant influence of technologies that become obsolete with the same speed with which they appear, where not only language, reading and writing deficiencies concur, but also social changes, product of the forms of communications and visions of the world.

User training

In order to approach the problem of a lack of skills in the optimal use of information resources that characterize our users, the lack of a library culture, added to the ignorance regarding our profession (the archetype of the librarian “passing books” still prevails), we propose to take this problem seriously, since it is affecting our professional image.

We need to develop cooperation strategies among universities (in the surveys conducted, our colleagues manifest their willingness to participate) and to form interdisciplinary groups made up of teachers, librarians, psychologists, all actors involved in the teaching-learning process, which permit us to approach the problem from a global perspective.

The survey conducted among university libraries shows that 63 % of them offer user training programs, which basically consist in training and guiding first-year students, by the means of formal methods (informative lectures related to services) and informal methods (individual help); 37 % do not carry out any kind of training. It follows that first-year students receive only very superficial training and that there is great number of users of higher level students that do not receive any kind of training. Besides, 38 % of the universities surveyed do not carry out adequate evaluations to measure the effectiveness that the training programs have on students.

On being asked the main obstacles which prevent the rest of libraries from carrying out training programs, 66 % recognize lack of time and staff to accomplish them; the other 34 % indicated an absence of internal policies, a lack of proven and effective methodologies and absence of sufficient studies on the local situation on these aspects.

Having come to a point of analyzing our professional reality, we realize that we are not prepared to generate user training programs because we have probably kept too much at a distance the main actor: the user. Becoming a user is being postponed by obsolete orientation methodologies. As professionals we are invaded by external elements that compel us to respond to a number of growing exigencies; the tendency has been toward strengthening technologies in the information center, the quality of the processes, diversification of services, all elements that tend to confuse the user naturally even more.

Proposition

It is essential to carry out a clear and deep diagnosis of the problem; for this we propose to create instances of participation between universities of the region (a working group)

in which to generate a basic plan as a response to common problems, a set of strategies and guidelines, which adjust to each particular need.

“User training programs are the bearers of the image that the library wants to project, reaching out to a considerable number of people, enabling new relations to arise, a better use of collections and services and grouping people about it.” (Mendoza 2000). The working group should focus its efforts on developing a diagnosis, specifying objectives and contents, selecting methodologies, test trials, implementation and evaluation.

The educated and autonomous user, with respect to services and information resources, a user satisfied with the services granted, would bring us somewhere near a profile with the following competencies (Cespedes 1997):

- The capacity to acknowledge his own need for information
- The capacity to select the information that he needs
- The self-acquisition of knowledge
- The development of critical thought
- The expansion of divergent thought (capability to bring up a hypothesis and to predict a result, to generate new strategies from the starting point of the information that he has and of the knowledge of that which he does not yet have or which results insufficient to him, and which is, therefore, crucial to search for in books or other sources of information)
- The construction of specific concepts and their relations (increasing his vocabulary, recognizing guidelines in images and in text, interpreting and producing text)
- And doubtlessly, the discovery of the pleasure of reading.

To speak of competencies in relation to the library, is to describe what sorts of things users have to know in regard to information and to the act of reading; it is to evidence actions or results that later will translate into a strategic, critical and autonomous user.

Conclusion

We have come to this point recognizing that we have to take a more active role in user training, carrying out efficient actions in the process of acquiring, transmitting and generating new knowledge. For this we have to prepare professionally, equipping ourselves with new skills, dedicating time to investigations in this area, becoming acquainted with similar experiences in other countries, divulging our new roles and finally, forming interdisciplinary teams to undertake tasks and problems common to university libraries.

We are convinced of the importance of cooperative work between libraries and teachers, where both can concur and coordinate the development of competencies in relation to information, determining contents which offer students the opportunities to exercise the different stages of the process of becoming informed. It is essential that this work arises

as a consequence of the institutional plan and valued by all actors involved. Important also, is that objectives of User Training Programs be integrated into the curricular contents of subjects of each institution.

In the opinion survey conducted among colleagues, we picked up an interesting consensus, which poses us common interests and challenges and a common concern, which is, the user. Already in 1962, Jolley stated that library staff should concern itself more with the promotion of study and teaching than with its routine tasks. It is part of its objective “to encourage the student in his personal search for information and knowledge”; he concludes that the true mission of a library and of the university consists in “teaching the student to teach himself” (Matus 2002).

We have not assumed an easy task: to conquer taboos surrounding our professional image; position ourselves in the midst of the organizations in which we work and within the collective conscience of our users. This will demand a great amount of creativity and patience. It will mean breaking down barriers sprung up between peers, breaking up the mental schemes and working as one in pursuit of common objectives.

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